Meet the Comics Pages: Lio

Mark Tatulli
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Cartoonist -- "Lio"
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Join Washington Post Comics page editor **Suzanne Tobin** on **Friday, Feb. 29 at 1 p.m. ET** for a discussion with "Lio" cartoonists Mark Tatulli.

Submit questions and comments before or during the discussion.

Mark Tatulli: Welcome, all! Suzanne is running a bit late, so I'll get things started...

Mark Tatulli: In case you didn't know, I'm Mark Tatulli and I draw the comics LIO and HEART OF THE CITY...LIO runs in the Washington Post and HEART, well, she's running elsewhere...

Philadelphia, Pa.: Have you made a total pledge that you will not use dialogue? I have noticed you've found many interesting ways to get around using dialogue. How frustrating is it, or it envigorating, to have limited your comic strip without using thought balloons?

Mark Tatulli: I'll never say never. You just never know. I have had other characters speak, but I can't imagine the main characters (LIO, dad, etc) ever tlking. I just don't think in that direction when I write.

Harrisburg, Pa.: If you were not a cartoonist, what else would you have been doing, indeed, perhaps still may do?

Mark Tatulli: I'm not really qualified for anything else anymore. I've been out of the TV business for three years now, so that leaves me in the dark there. I suppose I could collect stray shopping carts in the TARGET parking lot. That seems like something I might be able to handle.

Columbia, Md.: When did you realize you had a talent for drawing and dreaming up bizarre situations for a character?

Mark Tatulli: I don't think you "realize" it...it's just something that is. Basically, it's living out fantasies: if I can't live it in reality, I'll draw it. If I can't actually fly off with a jetpack, I can draw it and live through my artwork. Sad, eh?

Suzanne Tobin: Welcome, comics fans to another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist." Today, Mark Tatulli of "Lio" is joining us from his studio in New Jersey. Welcome, Mark, and thanks for joining us Live Online.

Mark Tatulli: Hey, thanks, Suzanne. Great to be here...from my New Jersey "Studio"...that is, my finished basement that I lovingly call "The Pit of Despair"

Mission Valley, CA: I love Lio's darker tone...it's so different from anything out there (which is a compliment!) Who were your influences for such a thing? I'm an Edward Gorey fan, along with Charles Addams and Gahan Wilson...do you draw inspiration from cartoonists like them?

Mark Tatulli: Those guys are great and I stand on their shoulders...actually, more like ride their coat tails. I great up on a steady diet of Gahan Wilson (whenever I could sneak away my dad's playboys or National Lampoons)

And, yes, I think LIO is very dark, compared to what runs is the newspapers. But relative to other mass media, he's pretty tame, wouldn't you say?

Ontario, Canada: Love your work, Mark! One particular LIO cartoon that I thought was hilarious (at first) was your lampoon of For Better or For Worse that started with Ellie shouting, "Our marriage is a sham!" Knowing your intentions were innocent, I still find it funny, but admittedly not as much since learning about Lynn Johnston's real life divorce. Do you regret drawing this one, or do you think she'd understand? Also, what are your predictions for this year's World Series?

- MC

Mark Tatulli: At the time I thought it was funny. In retrospect I absolutely cringe. I met Lynn in NYC at the Book Expo shortly before she went public and I always wondered if she wanted to claw my eyes out. I can only hope she never saw it.

Toronto, Ontario: Do you work on Lio and Heart at the same time, or do them on batches?

Mark Tatulli: I do them on separate days. It's the only way I can keep things straight. Some crossover does happen and it always scares me!

DeeCee: Describe you work day please. And make it sound

glamorous.

Mark Tatulli: I get up really late, sometimes noon. I check my email then I grimace at the thought of writing which leads to depression. I stare at rough notes and nothing comes. I finally start drawing because I'm beginning to panic. I hate what I finally turn into my syndicate. I cook dinner, usually something Italian. I continue to work and am distracted by televised debates of other political chatter. I work until 3 or 4 am, then I get drunk. I fall asleep in front of the tv. Rinse, repeat. That's my life...over and over and over. I haven't had a haircut in a year.

Suburbs, MD: This may sound like a weird question, but are you American? There is something about Lio that makes me think the strip is French. Maybe it's the spelling of the name or maybe I'm reminded somehow of The Little Prince.

Great strip, by the way - it's a unique perspective. Love the sloppy single father!

Mark Tatulli: I wanted LIO to have a certain sort of foreign look. Something slightly askew, ya know? I wanted the reader to think, "Jeez, should I even be looking at this? Is this for me or 'the others'? Kind of that odd feeling you get when you hear Turkish music.

Kansas City, MO: What do you think of Mort Walker's claim that he can do 20 gags an hour? Can you do that?

Mark Tatulli: I suppose that depends on how you define "gag"

Baltimore, MD: You now have two strips going seven days a week. Do you have any assistants, or is it all self-produced? Also, cartoonists seem to be of two sorts: those who are several weeks/months ahead, and those who look at their watch when you ask them how far in advance they work. Your work is not current-events-sensitive like "Doonesbury" or other strips can be; are you comfortably ahead or frantically trying to catch up? (The legend was that when Virgil Partch, or "Vip," died in a car crash, he had over two years' worth of advance work in his studio to fill out his obligations.)

Mark Tatulli: I am always fighting deadlines and it is very scary. It's no way to live and not for the weak!

Washington, D.C.: Not a question, just a shout out from a fan. I'm not a big comics person, but always seek out Lio, even on the days when I skip the others. Extremely clever and always makes me laugh. Love your work!

Mark Tatulli: Thanks! I love your work too! Your compliments are among the best I've ever read!

Tennessee: Suzanne,

This is the first online chat with cartoonist on the Post website in over a year or two. Do you have more chats planned this year?

Suzanne Tobin: Hi, Tennesee. Thanks for noticing! (And, sniff, I didn't think anyone cared!) I only did six chats last year, because I'm on the print side (which I would guess you never see) and these chats are an "extracurricular" activity to my real job. We redesigned both the daily and Sunday comics in the newspaper (daily debuted in March; Sunday in December) so I just didn't have time. I also started back to school in September to update my skills for electronic media (since the market watchers keep predicting the death of my beloved ink-and-paper career) so that also created a time crunch. But I'm truly hoping that things have settled down now, and hope to go back to my monthly schedule.

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kennebunkport, me.: Mark-

What is Stephan Pastis REALLY like?

Mark Tatulli: Suprising, he is a lot shorter than I thought. I suppose, scientifically, he could be classified as a dwarf, but he doesn't have the large head and short arms that are common...he's oddly proportionate. He looks normal on TV.
Speaking of which, check out stephan on TVs Donny Deutch's THE BIG IDEA this Monday the 3rd at 10PM (EST)

Chip from Atlanta: Your book is great, but it would look better in color. Any plans to do that? Or maybe a graphic novel with Lio as the lead?

Mark Tatulli: Well, the Sundays are in color and the printing is much better than the newspaper, so I'm pleased. I don't like coloring dailies. It makes the Sundays less special.

Honolulu: You seem angry. Are you angry?

Mark Tatulli: I'm not angry, just world-weary. I'm forty-five years old. World-weary is in the script. I think I'm mandated to be world-weary. I get a tax break or something.

Kensington, MD: Mark, I've been reading the comics pages since before the Germans invented the terlet and the hottest new strip was Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend. And I have to say that Lio is already in my Top Five all-time list. Right up there with Krazy Kat, a classic I'm sure you're familiar with. I hope you're about 15 years old and can keep it up for a long time.

Although I'm familiar with the concept of too much of a good thing, the one thing I'd love to see you do more of would be those parodies of some of the other strips. That send-up of For Better or Worse made me sorry I had a mouth full of pancakes and blueberry syrup that morning. Ruined a perfectly good tablecloth, but at least I yanked the strip out of the way.

Mark Tatulli: Hey, always glad to meet a die-hard comics fan!

I like doing the paradies too, but they tend to feel a bit "inside" and leave casual comics readers in the cold. Bit I will do them from time to time, I just have to space them out so the strip always remains about LIO.

Seattle, WA: Mark, my friends and family have withdrawn from civilization and started out own forest community. We all love LIO and have elected to use newspaper clippings of your strip as our currency. Little did my fellows know when we started this venture that I have been stockpiling clippings of LIO cartoons since your strip began. I am now the Bill Gates of "Tatulliput." Comments?

Mark Tatulli: You have a good internet connection in your little forest community!

Wilton, CT: I agree. You do seem a bit angry. Why? It seems like you have it all?

Mark Tatulli: The operative word is "seems"

Do you have any idea of the demons I live with?! Not to mention my children, who are teenagers!

Actually, I'm completely happy. My life is complete, I'm doing waht I love, my wife loves me, my kids are great and not doing drugs. I have a son in college who is doing fabulous in his first year. Everything is great! I must be getting ready to die.

Falls Church, VA: Easily one of the worst comics the Post carries. Ugly and not funny.

Mark Tatulli: Define "unfunny"...is it unfunny because you don't get it?
You have to qualify these statements

Suzanne Tobin: Dear Falls Church, thanks so much for joining the chat. We wouldn't want Mark to get a swelled head from all the praise he's getting in almost 100 other posts. Seriously, we want to hear from readers about what they think of the comics. Every day on the third page of the comics, under the horoscope, we list contact information (phone, e-mail or snail mail) for reader feedback. And I beg all readers to PLEASE let us know their opinion. But as I have said so often in these chats, "One man's meat is another man's poison." (I need to go check Bartlett's Quotations for the source of that quote...could it be Shakespeare?) We carry a range of comics and expect that very few readers will like them all. But each comic has its constituency. Think of it like the Sports page. You may be only interested in reading about the Redskins than the Wizards or the Capitals, but we need to cover them all because your neighbor on the left may be a basketball fan, and your neighbor on the right a hockey fan. So please be tolerant of other readers' preferences.

Marlboro, MA: If and when Lio speaks, will his voice

sound like Alanis Morrisette's did in

"Dogma"?

- Eric Burke

Sunday Funnies Review

Mark Tatulli: I hear a high-pitched english boy's voice...I don't know why.

Love your writing, by the way, Eric!

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portland oregon: I just discovered Lio and bought your book.

Lio: Happiness Is a Squishy Cephalopod. I love that he "defeats" the bullies. Will you ever animate Lio?

Mark Tatulli: We're working on a movie now, but it's just in the story idea phase. Still not sure if it live-action or animation.

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oregon: have you seen the weird youtube of the guy that does Garfield strips? He dresses up in a Garfield outfit and then does a video to a song. I think someone should do that with Lio!

Mark Tatulli: Gad, that sounds distubing! I LOVE it!

Make it so, number one!

Laurel, Md: The Lio cartoon should be dropped from the Post - it is the most disgusting horrible example of a comic and is a very poor role model for children who read the Post.

Mark Tatulli: Since when is a comic strip character a role model? You ok with your kid seeing Sarge beat Beetle Bailey to a pulp? You ok with Andy Capp obviously getting drunk over and over and over? You ok with the Lockhorns abusing each other and giving a horrible example of a loveless marriage?
And lets not even talk about the endless slaughter that's been going on in Prince Valiant for years! Please!

Suzanne Tobin: Hi, Laurel. Please see my response to Falls Church above. I'd really appreciate it if you would contact us and let us know both what you like and don't like. We always want to know our readers' preferences.

Seattle, Wash. : Hey, Mark. You do a lot of hilarious Lio strips featuring cameos from other famous cartoon characters -- For Better or For Worse, Calvin and Hobbes, Peanuts, Family Circus, etc. What has been the reaction from the creators whose characters have appeared in Lio? Do you warn anyone beforehand, or do they find out when we do? Any particularly great reactions? (Obviously Charles Schulz doesn't have any feelings about it one way or the other, but how about the rest of the above?) Okay, sorry, long question...

Cheers!

Mark Tatulli: I don't give a heads-up to cartoonists beforehand because it implies I think I'm doing something wrong. And I don't think I am.

I've heard from Cathy Guiswaite, Jeff Keane, Bunny Hoest, the guy who draws Mark Trail (can't

think of his name), etc. Cartoonists have a great sense of humor and I think deep down they know that I'm having fun with their characters because their characters are in lots and lots of newspapers and they are successful. And that's a good place to be!

Los Angeles, CA: Did you have any negative reaction from the "Calvin's skeleton in the snow" Sunday a little while back? I loved it, but I could see some people might have had a negative reaction...

Mark Tatulli: I got a lot of response from that strip, good and bad. What suprised me most is how well thought of CALVIN is even after not being in the paper for over 12 years. Fans certainly didn't want me touching it with my dirty hands. But I love sacred cows...they're just waiting to be skewered!

London, UK: Do you write and draw both strips all by yourself? Do you have an assistant who "fills in the blacks" and/or empties your trash?

Suzanne Tobin: Yeah, Mark, you dodged that question when Baltimore asked it earlier. 'Fess up...you're paying some poor art student minimum wage to help you, right?

Mark Tatulli: Sadly, I do it all myself. I would love if my kids would help, they're old enough now and talented but whenever I suggest it they say, "no, dad, we want our own careers"
Go figure.

Maryland: Do you draw on paper or do you use a Wacom or what?

ps Lio rocks!

Mark Tatulli: I draw on paper using Micron pens. The I assemble the LIO strips in Photoshop. The LIO originals are very odd looking.

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iowa: What other comics, new or old, do you recommend?

Mark Tatulli: I recommend all comics! Reading newspaper comics is good for our entire industry. Everybody has different tastes and I believe that most newspapers have something for everybody.

Akron, OH: You have one of the best strips in the paper. With you and some of the other younger, edgier strips, it seems like you guys are really starting a revolution, sweeping out a lot of the old stuff.

Mark Tatulli: From your lips to God's ears, my friend. But I think the old, old strips have a deathgrip on the comics pages and that's not likely to change. Only readers writing to their newspaper editors can effect change on the comics pages. It's up to you and yours.

DeeCee: What's the deal with Lio's Dad? Is he a secret drinker? He

seems to have a pretty grim back story, and I'm guessing it's

all Lio's fault.

Mark Tatulli: He's not a secret drinker...he drinks pretty openly. The dad character has broken more new ground than LIO, I think. I mean, here's a character that is a parent that encourages his twisted son in all things, walks around in his underwear drinking beer and is obviously unemployed.
Talk about groundbreaking! Or does it sound like Andy Capp? Nevermind.

Yes, dad has a dark backstory, but it has nothing to do with LIO...stay tuned!

La Mesa, CA: Suzanne...a question for you. As an editor, does a strip like "Lio" which occasionally pushes the boundaries, cause you more editorial headaches than something more bland? And how do you approach a cartoonist to say "Maybe we need to tone this one down a little..." That fine line between editing and creative expression...

Suzanne Tobin: Speaking of which, see the question from Los Angeles above? I thought the Calvin and Hobbes strip was fine. I didn't even flag it for review by my bosses. Then the ombudsman, Deborah Howell, got a few complaints about it, one from a parent who explained that his kids loved the Calvin and Hobbes books, and Lio, and reading the Sunday comics. But when the child read that Lio strip, the kid brought it to the parent's attention and said "This is going to give me nightmares." As for approaching a cartoonist, that's the syndicate's job. When I see something I think might be a problem ("Boondocks" was an editor's nightmare, and even so, I miss it terribly), I show it to my esteemed supervisors, who either okay it or, sometimes, kick it upstairs to their bosses. Personally, I can probably count on one hand the strips I've seen in my eight years in the job that I thought should be pulled. But we've pulled a lot more than that, because the people who make much bigger bucks than I (TPWMMBTI, for short), make those decisions. Generally, it's the usual hot button issues, religion, race and politics, that get screened more carefully. Then if the decision is to pull the strip, I contact the comic's editor at the syndicate, and they can choose to speak to the artist or not.

R lington: Which is your favorite Stooge? And don't say "Shemp".

Mark Tatulli: DING DING DING DING!

The magic word was STOOGE! What do we have for ourt winner, Suzanne?

Suzanne Tobin: Mark, you're the one with the prizes...a copy of your Lio book perhaps? (Here at the paper, we don't have a budget for those sorts of things. Haven't you read your Business section lately. We're going to be extinct in a few years!)

Detroit, Michigan: Have you ever been prohibited from riding on an amusement park ride by that sign that says, "You must be this tall to ride"?

Mark Tatulli: What do you think?

One of the most traumitizing moments of my life was when all the members of my family went on the bumper cars, even younger members who were taller, leaving me behind. I watched from the side as they laughed and banged around. Excuse me, I have to go cry...

Baltimore, MD: Not much of a question, really, just a shout-out to say thanks for all the hilarious work over the years. I've been following you since the days of "Bent Halos" (I sure hope I'm remembering the name right--that strip with the guardian angel), even if I've had to do it online in large part. I'm coming up to Philly for a beer festival tomorrow; can I wave across the river at you or what?

Okay, a question: I've seen several cartoonists lured away to more lucrative jobs. One prime example: Mark O'Hare, who drew the riotously-funny "Citizen Dog" before defecting to animation with some "Spongebob Squarepants" thing or another. Are your projects now keeping you secure enough that we don't have to worry?

Three cheers again to Lio, and to Heart, Dean, and Spock (meow).....

Mark Tatulli: I can't imagine myself doing anything else but comic stripping. I do love it so. Thankfully I make a pretty good living so I don't have to do anything else but. Still, it would be nice if I only had to do one comic strip. But, alas!

Washington, DC: When is the next "Lio" collection coming out?

Mark Tatulli: Sometime at the end of the summer there will be a new LIO book.

It's called, SILENT BUT DEADLY

Arlington, VA: Dear Mark -

Thank you for providing a fresh "voice" in the world of Comics. My whole family loves your work. And thanks to the POST for providing opportunities for living comics writers.

Mark Tatulli: HEAR HEAR

or is it

HERE HERE

oh, you know what I mean

Simon from Chicago: How many papers are you in? Why don't you color the strips? Why don't you do a TV show based on Lio?

Mark Tatulli: My current client list is about 330.

I don't like colored dailies. Ever seen a colored black and white movie? It doesn't look right.

Maybe someday LIO will make his way to TV...but movies first, I think.

Maryland: What makes you laugh?

Mark Tatulli: Fart jokes. Fart jokes are always funny to me. Unfortunately, we can't do fart jokes in the newspaper. I think Darby Conley did a GET FUZZY fart joke once. God bless him.

Vernon from Brunswick, GA: My paper has awful old strips, how can I convince them to run Lio?

What strips do you read?

Mark Tatulli: I read all the comics in the Philadelphia Inquirer (no offense, WP!) It's a good mix.

If you want change in your comics, you must write to your editors! They listen to readers! They don't listen to cartoonists. And if there is a reader poll or comics survery, make sure you stuff the ballot box in your favorite comics favor. I think there's a lot of that going on so it only seems fair that we all do it, don't you think?

Seattle, Washington: Stephan Pastis seems to have a really great comic strip. Have you ever touched him?

Suzanne Tobin: Pastis, how stupid do you think I am? Just because I didn't post your Santa Rosa questions, you think changing the town to Seattle is going to fool me? Stop your pitiful self-promotion and get back to work! Don't you have some crocodiles to draw?

Mark Tatulli: I avoid touching him. He's Greek (shudder)!

Creativity: Yes, per Falls Church, you should change the comic to be about how wives spend too much money or how darned adorable kids can be. We need more new, creative comics like LIO and many fewer of Family Circus and their tired ilk.

Suzanne Tobin: Now, now, children, let's play nice.

Los Angeles, CA: How did the writer's strike affect the plans for the "Lio" movie? Can you give us any news on that project at all?

Mark Tatulli: The writers strike shut LIO the Movie down. The producers are members of the guild so I couldn't even talk to them. But we're back on track!

Tatulliput, WA: Tatulliput, WA, challenges Falls Church, VA to a cardboard tube swordfight.

Suzanne Tobin: Oh, I want to see that!

Little Rock, AK: You said you work at home in your basement studio. How are you usually dressed when you work?

Mark Tatulli: Did you say "usually" or "unusually"?

Competition ?: You had a great comic a while back that seemed to poke fun at the static comics that still infest the funny pages. Do you work with your syndicate to try and change the 'old guard' of reprints-from-dead-guys ?

Mark Tatulli: My syndicate discourages "inside" gags like you suggest. They say it makes me sound bitter and I think that's correct. But I do like ribbing some strips from time to time.

San Diego, CA: Ok...you're stuck on a desert island, and you can only have one comic strip compilation library to read. (Not your own, ya narcissist, ya.) Me, I'm choosing "Bloom County." What do you choose? How about you, Suzanne?

Suzanne Tobin: San Diego, you ARE a troublemaker. I'm not touching this question with a 10-foot-pole. As my mother used to tell us, "Even a fish wouldn't get in trouble if it kept its mouth shut."

R lington: Did you see Beetle Bailey today?

Suzanne Tobin: Richard Thompson, have you finished your cartoon for tomorrow's paper yet? Get off this chat this instant! There's a reason we call them DEADlines!

Mark Tatulli: By the way, Richard, loved your dirty snowpile monster! Awesome!

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washington, d.c.: Mark, you liar, you. To everyone out there in chat land: Mark has a great voice. If he weren't a stripper, he'd be a singer.

-Anonymous

Mark Tatulli: But I like stripping more!

Seattle, WA: What's the strangest place you've found inspiration for a LIO strip?

Mark Tatulli: The bathroom. I think there are just so many ideas in the bathroom. Or maybe I just spend too much time in there...
Jeez, now I'm all embarassed...

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks so much, Mark, for taking so much time to chat with our readers. You've been a model guest!

Mark Tatulli: Thanks for having me, Suzanne! This has been great fun, for all that my fingers are whittled down to little stups now. It's totally gross! Sorry for the questions that I didn't get to answer, but you can always reach me at heartofthecity@hotmail.com

Thanks again, Suzanne, and thanks to the Washington Post!